

- 00:00:11.46 **LAUREN CORNELL:** Hi, I'm Lauren Cornell, I'm the director of the graduate program and chief curator at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard. It's my pleasure to introduce the artist, Jacolby Satterwhite, for this talk, which is presented by the Africana Studies and Film and Electronic Arts programs here at Bard College. Welcome, everyone. All Bard students that are present today. I know we also have a group from SUNY Purchase. Thanks for being here. So about his work, Jacolby has said, "I don't want to break the fourth dimension. I want to break the fifth dimension." This was a reference to the combination of virtual reality, sculptural neons, pigment prints and installation that has composed his bodies of work over recent years, including his latest one, which is called "We Are in Hell When We Hurt Each Other," and is currently on view at Mitchell-Innes and Nash Gallery in New York City. This combination of different forms, Jacolby said, Jacolby has said, is "a method of making a painting in the fifth dimension."
- 00:01:20.09 "We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other" orbits around what Jacolby calls a nucleus, which is a virtual-reality take on a pastoral concert that references Manet and an art historical tradition of the pastoral that is also rooted in the kind of settler romanticism of our very own Hudson Valley. But Jacolby's pastoral concert is a composite of recent protest footage, as well as found footage from Jerry Springer and other kind of trashy right wing media, all gathered together to present a kind of survey of our media time. Central to the piece, as you'll see, are what Jacolby calls Black post-humanist Fembots, who even in this kind of landscape of incredible violence and threats that he's created, are seen to thrive.
- 00:02:17.08 So I'm fortunate to have known Jacolby now for almost a decade, from his early exhibitions at galleries and artist-run spaces in New York City. Formerly before Bard, I served as the director of Rhizome, and it was my role in that position to mark innovative approaches to media. As Jacolby has moved from video through to augmented reality to virtual reality, his animation has always been groundbreaking and has had so much to teach to the field of media and the broader field of contemporary art, particularly in his use not only of new media but also in his insistence on the hand-made and the embodied when it comes to virtual form. Jacolby draws everything in his animations by hand, traces everything by hand, and choreographs and dances most of the movements himself in front of a green screen and brings his own life and autobiography into the works, particularly in collaboration with his mother, Patricia Satterwhite, an artist whose poems and drawings are often featured.
- 00:03:35.94 In this latest body of work, Patricia Satterwhite is again a major participant. "We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other" is the third installment in a trilogy that took five years to make, during which Jacolby produced an album, "Love Will Find a Way Home" with Nick Weiss of Teen Girl Fantasy, that lays a hundred and fifty five a cappella tracks that his mother recorded on cassette tapes in the eighties and nineties onto dance tracks. And the album provides the score for the latest VR work. So previous iterations of the trilogy have been featured in many places, including the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philly, Pioneer Works in New York City, Whitechapel Gallery in London, MoMA in New York, the MIA in Minneapolis and so on. Jacolby is also a really incredible collaborator and he works in between contemporary art, moving image, and pop culture. And he also worked on Solange's video visual album "When I Get Home" in 2019. So on behalf of everyone who organized this talk, I'm honored to have Jacolby here with us today and I truly believe he is an excellent model for us at a teaching institution, for the

relentless originality of his vision and for the incredible generosity that he brings to everything he does. So thank you for being here, Jacolby. Jacolby is going to speak for about 30 to 40 minutes. And then he'll be in conversation with Ed Halter and me and everyone else here, please feel free to ask questions via audio and also via chat. And please feel free also to engage in this talk, however you like, with your video on or off, with your audio on or off, whatever makes you most comfortable. So thank you so much, Jacolby.

00:05:50.55 **JACOLBY SATTERWHITE:** Hello, everyone. Thank you, Lauren. So I guess I should just get started and because I love getting to the Q&A, can we start with "The Matrix Rhapsody" playing, please? And go on Zoom, so I usually start with this video every time I do a talk, it's the foundational video, it's the codex. In video games and fantasy games like Dungeons and Dragons, they will call this the legends in my fantasy world, like is like the weapon kit. So what you're looking at is a triptych film that is forty three minutes long, that acts as sort of a databank for how I kind of generate, like architectural landscapes in my CGI narratives. The drawings on the left are made by my mother, Patricia Satterwhite. She started drawing these when I was a child.

00:06:56.29 Amidst like really adverse situations regarding my father losing his grocery store and our family falling into poverty, she went into this delusion of grandeur and felt like if she made these schematic diagrams and sent them off to the Home Shopping Network into pay programs and got them invented, that it will relieve us from poverty. So as a six and seven year-old, I thought like this was the most amazing thing. And my father knew that she was becoming schizophrenic and just wanted to make her happy so he would just buy her all the crayons and color markers that she wanted.

00:07:30.16 And they were like these markers that smell really good. And they were like glitter, you know how kids drawing utilities are so extreme. So as a kid, I was like, I want to I want to use these materials, I want to use these materials. And she was like, you have to learn how to draw. You have to become an artist, honey. And so basically, I like refined my drawing skills and got my stuff together, and then I was assisting her in making these drawings.

00:08:00.19 But eventually, I deviated from assisting her to just going on to my own path and making my own drawings in my bedroom and playing video games and being sort of a loner in my own right, like, you know, trying to get out of that house. Eventually applied to boarding school. And I went to boarding school and graduate an undergrad and graduate school and studied painting and got really immersed in our historical dialogue and theory.

00:08:27.42 And like all of my life, basically went down deep exploration of the art canon and forgetting about my origin. You know, I just wanted to be a great painter. And I was obsessed with like the painters, like Neo Rauch and the Abstract Expressionist and the Neo-expressionist and German Expressionist and figuration. Figuration globally was just something that I wanted to, like, you know, I wanted to be a part of that lexicon. But unfortunately, when you're in school and you're Black and queer, they're always trying to, like, pivot you to find... They're like: why are you using the impressionist stroke like this in your art, or are you painting like Kehinde Wiley or something like that, or I don't know, there was just a certain kind of pigeonholing that, like, forced me to feel like I needed to exit that medium for a second. And so once I had a roadblock with painting, I started to refuse the canvas by, like, entering performance space. And while I was performing, I was studying Dada and Fluxus and surrealist strategies and games.

00:09:33.62 And coincidentally, I went back home and saw that my mother was still making these drawings. And so I basically realized from just becoming an art nerd, looking at her drawings, I was like, wow, your text and your language is like Gertrude Stein. Like, what the hell? The double

entendres in this is are amazing, the line in the drawings are amazing, the economy in the drawings are amazing, the ways you spatially organize these shapes are amazing.

00:10:00.50 And I asked her if I could take these drawings back to New York with me. No, back to Baltimore and New York. I was like oscillating in the area, but I took them with me, but I didn't know what to do with them. But they were just inspiration at first. And I would show them to teachers and stuff and they will, you know, it was just, like, whatever. And so eventually I, I think it was around the time when I went to, I was in graduate school or going to school here and I started to imitate my inspirations from Fluxus and Dada and pretend like these drawings were performance scores, and I would, like, allow them to help me generate spontaneous action from reading the text and the prompts and that that is what I will perform in front of the camera.

00:10:47.75 And then when I continued to explore that I got so tired of just doing performance, I missed using my hands. So I started to teach myself how to use animation softwares and I was studying Arduino boards and coding and just trying to figure out, like, I was experimenting or failing on purpose. But I came across this one activity that really helped me have an "aha moment", which is rotoscoping and tracing and drawing the lines in my 3D animation program from the drawings extruding those lines and construct them into elements of these architectural forms, so I could create this massive landscape in this pastoral concert tableau that reminds me of those paintings that I like. And it was like my major "aha moment". I was like, wow. Oh my God. I can not only can I compose these in architectural space, I can green screen my body and then make an alpha channel around it and composite my body multiple times in this time-based moving space and have a, like, a four-dimensional painting.

00:11:53.99 I can, I can play with like acoustics, and lighting, and depth of field, and movement and dance, and performance, and modernist dance and color and texture. And it felt, like, this weird vortex of like, you know, it just was great. And so basically, so then I segued into making the film "Country Ball" later on, which was a breakthrough for me because I was able to think about the VHS tape from my family's Mother's Day cookout as a pastoral concert scene. I was thinking about my mother's VHS, I mean, the VHS tape of a Mother's Day cookout as a pastoral concert, seeing as a Nigerian Masquerade tribal thing. I was thinking about how, wow, this VHS tape of my family that I'm observing is something I want to recreate and re-perform.

00:13:10.68 I was also thinking about how performances were becoming institutionalized as scores. In the in the art world, Marina Abramovic was selling performance scores to institutions, and that was the dialogue acquiring like the time-based, acquiring a certificate was such a big thing in 2010, 2011 and 2012. Cliff Owens had a show on it that I contributed a score to. And so I thought while this VHS tape and my mother's drawings are a collection of scores and I want to re-perform this and create a CGI re-performance of this VHS tape using thirty five duplications of my body, using the thirty five CGI created drawings of American material culture like KFC buckets and pots and pans and carousels. And then I will employ them into this space and make this pastoral concert that eventually disintegrates into the decline of capitalism. When the video proceeds, you start to see, like, American dream signs fading and disintegrating into action. Eventually, the film completely disintegrates into just a contour line of the actual VHS tape, as this constellation. And so in a way, that was like my first foray into like the dystopian idea, from utopian to dystopian. Can we go to the next video?

00:14:40.31 So then then there's "Reifying Desire Six." "Reifying Desire Six" was created, it was, so, after "Country Ball", I made a series called "Reifying Desire" which was a series of six gestation cycles that I wanted to create. And the reason why I approach gestation cycles as a narrative,

because it's the most banal thing that animators gravitate to, like, study as novice beginners. Like when you study at CalArts or an animation school, the first thing they do is make you make a flip-book of a flower growing. And so I was like, OK, well, maybe I'll make every chapter of "Reifying Desire" a variation of the gestation cycle. And so when Stuart Comer invited me to be in the Whitney Biennial and I felt like, I was like twenty six or twenty seven, and I was like, oh my God, this is a big show, and I have to make it the ultimate gestation cycle.

00:15:36.17 So I kind of decided, I wanted it to be like this irreverent, funny, but like poignant, kind of like poetic thing. And so, you know how my work is so much about observation and the pastoral scene, or turning something from real life into CGI, I started recording myself performing in New York City a lot. And then in Marin County in San Francisco with Ed Halter, actually, he was there in the residency with me, which is what you're looking at in that footage on the beach. And I just wanted to kind of like use, like, live action footage, my mother's drawings, and certain collaborations on the green screens as anchors to kind of how I would create the 3D animation. So, you know, one of the things that, getting back to the final gestation cycle idea; in 2014 Truvada was just, you know, distributed to the general public and it was groundbreaking. Truvada, the pill that prevents HIV, like, you can just take it every day and have, raw sex.

00:16:47.57 I know that sounds weird to say, but yeah, that's what it is. And so, like, I, I was like, oh, I just thought of how groundbreaking that was for the gay community and how it was really going to expand, like, I guess transgressive things... I just knew I had to explore it. So I thought, well, how can I react to this? I wanted to invite one of the most controversial bareback porn stars from that time period to kind of breed me to have sex with me on the green screen. And we were going to make this science-fiction utopian, like, family tableau. And it was just a way to kind of be like the zeitgeist-y spirit of the times by having, like Antonio Biaggi, this porn star, and like make an Afro-futurist film with me gestating a baby, and we are creating like a metropolis city together.

00:17:45.34 You know, he was very, he was vilified during that time by, like, gays, they were kind of saying that he was, like, glorifying dangerous and problematic sexual activities for people. And that was what in all the articles in these gay publications was written about him. So I thought, like, oh, he's my muse for this piece. I spent way too much time talking about that part. I mean, we could, I could, if I let this video play, you could probably see those scenes, but I don't know how to do that in a zoom session. So after "Reifying Desires" was done, I got a big commission from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to create, you know... They wanted me to do a performance residency for two years in creating this massive performance and sculptural installation. And my idea was that I was going to take the other archive left behind by my mother for me, which was her cassette tapes.

00:19:10.04 She also made one hundred and fifty five a cappella cassette tapes that were like American folk songs, original songs she wrote in and out of the mental hospital. She would use her thigh and her pencil as the metronome to kind of balance these songs and to write these songs. And they were songs about, you know, heartbreak and happiness and New Age. They were every kind of variety of song you can make, because her purpose was to get these songs published as poems or jingles for commercials, or it was all, like, a capitalist endeavor. And so I, again, thought these were very poignant and they were also a big part of my life, but something I understood more than most. And so I thought it would have been really interesting if I created a trip hop record, like electronic music record using Ableton and Pro Tools and and really took it super seriously. So I worked with my friend Nick Weiss. He taught me a lot about Pro Tools and Ableton, and we made this lush one-hour and 20 minute album over two years that spans the genres of techno, drum and bass, and trip hop.

- 00:20:15.61 And this album is called "Love Will Find a Way Home", and my band is PAT. Patrick Belaga is a cellist who plays on it, I have Lawfawndah, Kindness. I have lots of features on the album, it's sort of like a Massive Attack project in a way. But the whole reason why I wanted to do an album is because streaming media has really, really disintegrated the value of the music as an object. And I wanted to bring the objecthood back to music. I was thinking, how could I make an album that is a virtual reality headset. I wanted the viewer to be able to listen to a whole hour-long album on a virtual reality headset which will allow them to have reentry. Like, what from the album would I experience listening to it, looking up at the ceiling? How? Well, what kind of synesthesia will I experience from the album, listening to it on X axis or the Y axis or the Z axis. So for me it was a more of a sculptural possibility that was really, really, really amazing for me. So when we were making the album, like, the album was influencing the lyrics in the album and the soundscape that we were creating, that was influencing all the visuals.
- 00:21:25.64 My green screen was in my backpack all the time and I would, like, put it up at the club, I will put it up at the Standard Hotel, I will put it up in Fire Island. And I was just in a guerrilla-style collecting bodies as another archive. What was great about this project is that I was moving away from my mother's drawings and her songs and I was collecting my own, original, new archives to generate new video, which was people. Having people perform spontaneously on a green screen, like, over 50 people and marinating over that green screen footage for years, tracing their hands and feet and figuring out ways to generate narrative from those spontaneous movements. You know, this is when world building begins to metastasize. And that was what was so fun about it, that was that was the ground. That was how I broke ground with this project. OK, so. this is my exhibition at Pioneer Works. Pioneer Works, actually, they really helped me, like, flesh out the whole project in physical form because they published the vinyl record part of the album and made this beautiful book that the vinyl record sit in and we made a Tower Records record shop dedicated to the album.
- 00:22:54.80 My gallery, Mitchell-Innes and Nash, we presented the album project with the neon track list that you see on the wall. So this neon is a track list of the album and sorry, I'm sounding really convoluted. Just start over. So basically what you're looking at in this light is the Tower Records-esque store that holds the virtual reality record shop. So, when I say virtual reality record shop, I mean that we had a virtual reality headset tethered to all of the album shelves, which you can see in the slide. Next slide, that's the track list. This is the record shop. Next slide. These cabinets are, I call them shrines, they are a major part of the first chapter, the video called "Moments of Silence". They're basically kind of they're, like, they're quoting consumerists, entertainment centers that you see at Sears in a hybrid... But like they're like these domestic kind of configurations. But they also reference supremacism and geometric abstract painting in a way.
- 00:24:06.69 And there's like these double entendre, tongue-in-cheek quotations in them. Also, you know, these shelves have, they kind of, are sort of, like, footnotes for the films where the shrines are all thematic. And so there's like shrines for drug designs, shrines for money design, shrines, for American dreams, in each. And they have these picture frames with videos on them in the videos are, like, they're like 20 videos and, not 20, sorry, like five videos installed on each shrine. And those videos are sort of, kind of, like, are conceptual portals to those things. It's sort of like a metonymy practice. I mean, I can go further into that. But this project is the two shrines are being modulated to, there's one more little layer I had to add to it.
- 00:24:59.46 That's a shrine for drugs designs. This is a two-channel installation that shows that.. This is, so the visual album is a 3D animation that is an hour-long and 20 minutes now. And this is how it looks projected, it will be at the Tate Modern screening like this next year, which is awesome.

Next. This is a room dedicated to my mother's bare bone drawings and the sound lyrics that are in the installation. Next. These are the a cappella listening stations of my mother's a cappellas. Next. Next. Next. Close ups of the shrines with 3D printed objects from the drawings. The shrines are sort of like, I don't know how to call, it's like an index, a painterly index. Next. Next. Next, next, next, next, next. And this is the this is the record shelves with the vinyl's installed in them and you can listen to the album on the VR headset. Is sort of like, I wanted to, you know, like I said, I wanted music to have to be an object again. Since streaming media makes it so disposable, you can put on his headset and listen to this electronic record, but with VR.

00:26:28.39 And it's like you're being at, you are used to the record shop. I wanted that to have like a new media feeling, like a sculptural feeling. Next. Cool posters because I'm narcissistic. Next. Next, next. This is a sculpture, "Remote Control for the Cocks on Wheels" something like a sculpture, referencing my mother's drawing stuff. She made these, she used to make these sexualized, erotic toy sculptures. Now, this tableau.. I love animating highways and freeways, but I've never done a moving animation of it yet. I've been toying with it. So maybe this sculpture is going to be referenced in my next video. Next. This is a sculpture based on Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon", and by using my mother's drawings of a water tub and I have these figures inside of them. And, you know, next.

00:27:28.04 This sculpture is a seven-foot tall sculpture called "Room for Doubt". So this sculpture is an important piece for me because, I don't know, I've been referencing Caravaggio's "Doubting Thomas" painting my whole life. I've always drawn it. I've always referenced, the metaphor from it has evolved for me over the time. But Caravaggio's "Doubting Thomas" was used in religion and the Renaissance and the church to promote faith and ritual. It was sort of propaganda for faith and ritual. And the allegory around the painting was about skepticism because St. Thomas was skeptical that Jesus was real. So he had to touch his wound. And I just felt, like, in this era of misinformation and pandemic culture and, like, algorithms and, you know. It's basically like Cambridge Analytica and in this weird biological warfare post-futurist culture, this sculpture feels very relevant to me. Inside of the monitors also, which we don't have video of, actually I'm rejecting a painting of a Xerox.

00:28:30.26 I mean, I'm rejecting a number of getting a Xerox of a virus. I'm covered with paint all over my body. And I'm rejecting this Xerox with a virus, a print of a virus on it. I'm like gliding on top, back and forth. So it's like an anthropomorphic video that shows me like personifying an antibody. Like, I'm basically like a living antibody inside of each figure, but you can't see the figures, so whatever. Next. This is "Room for Levitating Beds", is referencing the Antonio Biaggi footage from "Reifying Desires Six", where he and I are in a bed together and it's in my show, my show at Mitchell-Innes and Nash right now, next.

00:29:16.11 Next. This is "Room for Ascension". But, next. The sculpture, next. VR stations, next. So in my exhibition at Mitchell-Innes and Nash I created the final chapter to the "Birds in Paradise" series called "We Are in Hell When We Hurt Each Other", I created it. I started working on it last November and finished it, you know, the day before the show, of course. These things are so labor intensive and can take forever, but while making it, it was insane that I was in lockdown, in quarantine. I was alone, I was isolated and people were protesting downstairs from my apartment. I would go outside with a GoPro and an iPhone and I would just record people protesting in the park, in McCarren Park, over Breonna Taylor. And we were just in like, you know, it just this really heightened time. It was so crazy.

00:30:21.56 So I couldn't help but react to this climate, to react to this, and react to the... You know, I had to make a simulacra kind of piece, I had to react to the spirit of this. I mean, this is not a

didactic situation, but I thought, well, I guess I need to return to the pastoral concert, which, you know, the definition of a pastoral concert is like these paintings that kind of explore, these paintings that portray musings over the humanities and poetry and music and politics and dance.

00:30:57.33 And so I wanted to make a... I felt like with 2020, I felt like modernism broke, modernism shut down, postmodernism broke, postmodernism shut down. We're in this new era. I don't know what it is. We're in this new reconfiguration of truths, like we're in this fragmented era where confusion is being weaponized by people in power. And so I felt like using my mother's track, "We Are in Hell when We Hurt Each Other" was very cool and funny and an irreverent way to like, you know, it was just fun. And so I thought, I'm going to recreate Monet's "Luncheon On the Grass", but it's going to be, instead of... That painting was very controversial and it was considered the dawn of modernism. "Luncheon On the Grass" was the painting that started modernism because it was the famous painting where someone painted bourgeoisie, middle-class people on a large painting surface, which was reserved, painting was reserved for the divine. So I thought, how could I invert that? Oh, I'm going to create this dystopian landscape, pastoral concert where the only thing that is thriving are divine Black female CGI figures.

00:32:05.27 And so, that's the whole spiel, that was sort of like an ironic paradox, but in a way. So like the piece is twenty four minutes and there is a VR component that you can watch that's eighteen minutes. And the VR component looks exactly like the video so you can look in any direction and you can look at it on a chair. And I guess that's, that's where I'm at today because I want to to do a Q and A.